

Disseminating the Renaissance in seventeenth-century England: Pomponazzi, Blount and the Three Impostors

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**DISSEMINATING THE RENAISSANCE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY
ENGLAND:
POMPONAZZI, BLOUNT AND THE THREE IMPOSTORS**

Historians' understanding of the deist movement in England in the seventeenth century has improved substantially over the last twenty years, but the subject is still in need of heightened scholarly attention. In particular, although much has been done to trace connections between English deism and the eighteenth-century continental Enlightenment, much more remains to be done to show how deists were influenced by the sixteenth-century Renaissance.

An overlooked source for an oft-cited letter may help us in this endeavour. In February 1680, the deist Charles Blount (1654-93) wrote to the famous libertine (and probable deist) John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester to discuss the immortality of the soul. This letter has been used, especially by the leading scholar of the early English Enlightenment, Justin Champion, to place Blount as an original thinker at the nexus of English deism and continental philosophy, against those who criticize him as banal plagiarist.

In such analyses, Blount's letter is connected to the legend of the Three Impostors, the pervasive rumour that a treatise existed suggesting that Moses, Jesus and Mohammad were impostors who fabricated evidence of divine appointment for political ends. Certainly a manuscript containing such an argument was circulating by the 1690s, and was published as *Le Traité des Trois Imposteurs* in 1719. As early as the 1640s, however, there are suggestions that a manuscript version of this argument may have been extant in England, and Blount's letter has been used as evidence that he had access to a Latin version. The evidence is drawn particularly from a passage in which Blount states that 'it is absolutely necessary to grant, either that the whole World is deceiv'd, or at least the great part of it; for supposing that there be but three Laws, viz. that of *Moses*, that of Christ, and that of *Mahomet*; either all are false, and so the whole World is deceiv'd; or only two of them, and so the greater part is deceived'.¹ From this, Champion concludes that 'the Latin treatise [was] at his elbow' while he was writing to Rochester.²

¹ Charles Blount, *Oracles of Reason* (London, 1693), 123.

² Justin A. I. Champion, 'Legislators, Impostors, and the Politic Origins of Religion: English Theories of "Imposture" from Stubbe to Toland' in *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, ed Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert and Richard H. Popkin (Manchester, 1996), 349.

Unfortunately, the letter can be neither evidence of Blount's originality of argument nor of his access to a manuscript edition of *De Tribus Impostoribus*, because the words are not his own. Instead, Blount is quoting directly from a 1516 treatise by Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525): *Tractatus de immortalitate animae*. And it wasn't just these few lines that Blount takes from Pomponazzi. Of Blount's ten-page letter to Rochester, four are taken up by a discussion that appears to be his original contribution, containing a long selection from Chapter XIV of Pomponazzi's treatise. The other six pages are acknowledged quotations from other sources – Scripture, Averroës, Pliny – as well as Blount's address to Rochester and statement of purpose.

Blount's use of Pomponazzi has been recognized before, albeit in passing, in Don Cameron Allen's *Doubt's Boundless Sea* (1964). Allen notes that Blount 'quotes Pomponazzi's paradox of the three religions and approves the Paduan's theory that immortality was invented by lawgivers to win men to virtue'.³ One can certainly see how later historians may have missed Allen's identification of a large part of Blount's letter as being from Pomponazzi, as it is so briefly treated and no further conclusions are drawn.

There was no print English edition of Pomponazzi's treatise, so Blount was probably working from a copy of the Latin. Pomponazzi (or Pomponatius) was an author often associated with unorthodox religious beliefs, grouped with Spinoza and Hobbes in treatises decrying the growth of deism and atheism, and Blount makes reference to his *De immortalitate animae* in his own *De anima mundi* of 1679. The treatise was on his mind and readily on hand when he wrote to Rochester in early 1680.

He even makes reference to Pomponazzi at the close of the letter, suggesting that '*Pomponatius... will furnish your Lordship with great Variety upon this subject*'.⁴ Although this is not an explicit acknowledgement of his source, we still may not want to suggest that Blount's letter can be accounted plagiarism. He bookends his use of Pomponazzi with subtle signs that the words are not his own, beginning 'it has been reply'd...' and ending '...And therefore, *my Lord*'.⁵ Furthermore, the content of this section makes little sense out of the context of Pomponazzi's treatise, for Blount keeps the references to the 'above mentioned' 'Ranks' of men, discussed earlier in Pomponazzi's work.⁶ A reader familiar with Pomponazzi, as Rochester almost certainly was, would probably not have missed the use of the source or Blount's signposting.

As Champion suggests, because of Blount's work as transmitter for historic unorthodox texts, it is 'as a publicist rather than a plagiarist that Blount should be appreciated'.⁷ The understanding of this letter as taken from Pomponazzi fits nicely within this idea of

³ Don Cameron Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), 194.

⁴ Blount, 127.

⁵ Blount, 123, 126.

⁶ Blount, 125.

⁷ Justin A. I. Champion, *The Pillars of the Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and Its Enemies, 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 142.

Blount as ‘a literary conduit for the works of Renaissance sceptics’ such as Pomponazzi,⁸ and enlightens the ‘understudied’ nature of Blount’s disseminative practices of Renaissance religious thought.⁹ It also helps to explain why so many parallels were being drawn between Renaissance writers such as Pomponazzi and seventeenth-century deists such as Blount and Toland – the latter were encouraging the comparison.

But what about the connection between Blount’s letter and the Three Impostors? What happens to this early evidence of the Latin treatise if we move the content of the letter from 1680 to 1516? Certainly, we are forced to conclude that Blount did not have *De Tribus Impostoribus* on hand, but instead it was *De immortalitate anima* ‘at his elbow’. But what about Pomponazzi and the Three Impostors? The identification of Blount’s letter with Pomponazzi’s 1516 treatise raises intriguing questions about the web of interactions between medieval legends such as the Three Impostors, Renaissance religious writing, and the tradition of seventeenth-century English deism.

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⁸ Justin A. I. Champion, ‘Deism’ in *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Richard Popkin, Stephen F. Brown, David Carr, Brian P. Copenhaver, Thomas R. Flynn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 440.

⁹ Champion, *Pillars*, 143n.